by Kevin Savetz

iWork '06

iWork '06
$79
Apple Computer
www.apple.com/iwork

iWork '06, Apple's second-gen productivity suite, includes Pages 2 and Keynote 3. Pages focuses as much on designing documents as on word processing. Included templates let you create stationery, invitations, term papers, etc. This version adds two dozen templates (now totaling nearly 70), including marketing materials and newsletters. Also new is the ability to create calculated tables and 3D charts. These features can't approach Excel's many features, but they'll let you present data in a colorful, easy-to-read format.

Also new is Reviewer Comments for adding notes in margins and Mail Merge, which is integrated with the Mac OS Address Book. Following the seemingly simple directions in the PDF manual, however, I couldn't get even one address automatically included in a letter. Integration with other apps was solid, though. Pages can't match Microsoft Word's enormous feature-set, thus it's probably not the best fit for professional writers. And while customizable auto-correction is a welcome addition, indexing functions, macro tools, and the ability to see a word count for a portion of a document are still notably missing from the app.

Conversely, Keynote 3 knocks its competitor, PowerPoint, up against the ropes. The presentations Keynote creates via elegant transitions, beautiful backgrounds, and animations are stunning. The app also includes new themes designed to fit 1,920 x 1,080 high-def displays. Like Pages, Keynote adds auto-calculated tables and Reviewer Comments, this time via on-screen sticky notes. The best addition may be Interleaved Bullet Builds, which let you have a visual element appear alongside a bullet point and then disappear as you move to the next point. Relative to PowerPoint, Keynote is easy to use and offers intuitive integration with iPhoto, iTunes, and QuickTime movies.

Overall, Pages is a solid word processor with decent features for making great-looking layouts. Keynote makes giving presentations (and sitting through them) more than tolerable. Both programs are non-threatening on the face, but the digital manuals reveal features that aren't so obvious. Unfortunately, printed documentation is limited to slim booklets. ▲

iLife '06

iLife '06
$79 (bundled with new Macs)
Apple Computer
www.apple.com/ilife

The iLife '06 suite turns any Mac into a multimedia powerhouse. Included with new Macs ($79 separately), iLife is practically a necessity for any Mac user who uses a digicam or digital video camera.

The iMovie HD tool lets you do high-def video editing. Version 6 adds real-time video effect previews and cool new audio effects. (A fast rig will provide better enjoyment; my aging G4 desktop upgraded to 1.2GHz sometimes played back jerky video.) iDVD 6 lets you burn your movies to DVD. This version supports widescreen output and (finally) burning with DVD drives other than Apple's SuperDrives. iPhoto remains the tool for managing digital photos. Version 6 boosts the library's maximum size to 250,000 photos and is noticeably faster than the previous version. A new full-screen editing mode lets you better fine-tune photos, and an effects palette adds edge effects to the sepia and other coloring effects from earlier versions. Also handy is Compare, which displays up to eight images side by side so you can select the best ones. A new Photocasting feature lets you publish images online for public or private viewing, but it's only available if you sign up for a .Mac account.

iWeb, a new app for creating Web sites and blogs "in minutes," starts you off with a list of templates, but there are only a dozen, with such themes as Road Trip and Baby. iWeb outputs beautiful Web sites, though, and lets you publish photo albums and podcasts easily. Anyone beyond newbie Web publishers will find its limitations constraining, however, as it doesn't do a good job of optimizing images for quick downloading, and publishing a site without a .Mac account takes more steps than seems necessary.

GarageBand, the suite's audio tool, now includes a podcast recording studio and the ability to record iChat conversations, which Apple suggests for doing podcast interviews. Relatively few people used GarageBand 2, despite it being a nifty music tool, but with these podcast-creation tools, GarageBand 3 should be useful to many more people.

iWeb and GarageBand aren't for everyone, but the other additions to iLife's core apps are well worth the price. ▲

CPU RANKING ○ 0 = ABSOLUTELY WORTHLESS | ●●◖ 2.5 = ABSOLUTELY AVERAGE | ●●●●● 5 = ABSOLUTELY PERFECT